



Salt

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SALT. Salts (sodium and potassium) are essential to human and animal diets. Sufficient salt for physiological regulation frequently is obtained through other foods, particularly meat and salty plants. However, salt can also be crucial for medicinal purposes, mining, dying cloth, flavor enhancement, food preservation, and other cultural reasons. Surplus salt was critical to the development of all complex societies and also many smaller-scale communities. Salt archaeology began among scholars studying native North American salt making, particularly in the Mississippi Valley. As the field developed, a comparative archaeology of salt emerged starting in the 1970s.

Salt is available from five primary sources: rock salt, seawater, salt lakes, brine springs, and salty plants. All can be used directly, but more often they are processed to remove impurities and obtain salt crystals. Salt archaeology examines the contexts where salt was produced to supplement normal food consumption, and the salt trade. Rock salt can be mined directly. Archaeological research on rock salt (e.g., Hallstatt, Austria) focuses on mine technology and associated artifacts. Processing other forms of salt required solar evaporation or the intentional heating of brine acquired from lakes, springs, the sea, or from combining ashes of burned salty plants with water. In solar evaporation, fields of evaporation facilities may remain for archaeological investigation. These exist in highland Peru as terraces, in East Africa as lakeside facilities, and in many coastal locations, such as coastal Maya sites. Most archaeologically visible are locations where brine was collected and then artificially heated. Remains include brine-collection facilities, such as troughs and pits at sites in Romania, Mexico, England, China, and elsewhere, and vessels used for heating brine and forming salt cakes. Ceramic vessels and terracotta objects used to prop them up are collectively known as briquetage and are the most common category of salt-related archaeological artifact. Briquetage have been used to

understand salt production techniques and organization in contexts as diverse as inland and coastal China, Central Europe, England, West Africa, the Philippines, the Mississippi River valley, central Anatolia, Japan, and elsewhere.

Further Reading

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Rowan K. Flad